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A
GENTLEMAN'S
RELIGION:
WITH THE
Grounds and Reasons of It.

IN WHICH

The Truth of Christianity in general is vindicated; Its Simplicity asserted; And some Introductory Rules, for the discovering of its particular Doctrines and Precepts, are proposed.

By a Private Gentleman.

[Edward Synges, DD]

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A
GENTLEMAN's
RELIGION:
WITH THE
Grounds and Reasons of It.

I. **S**INCE almost all Men
(however different
in other Opinions
and Interests) have
ever agreed in this, That there
is a God, to whose power all
things are subject ; That the
true Service and Worship of
God (which is called Religi-
A 2 on)

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on) shall be rewarded with Future Happiness ; and, That the Neglect and Contempt of Religion shall be punished with Future Misery ; Every Man surely has reason to believe thus much at least, That what is so generally and firmly believed may be possibly, nay and is probably, a Truth. And wheresoever there is a possibility, and much more where there is a probability, of a great Good on the one hand, and a great Evil on the other ; there certainly every Man is concerned to enquire into the reality of the thing ; that he may not miss of the one, if it be attainable, nor fall into the other, if it be avoidable. I conclude therefore,

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fore, That *it is a very great folly for any Man to give over searching after the True Religion, untill he has found it ; Except he were able to demonstrate, either that there is no God ; or else, that there is no Worship or Service due to him.*

II. In all Matters of great and serious Consequence, no Man that is wise, will act by chance, and at random, without being able to give some Reason for what he does. For he that does any thing, and knows not why, is more likely to do himself Hurt than Good ; because there are more Ways to the former, than to the latter. Since therefore Religion is a thing of the greatest Moment and Importance that can be,

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I conclude, that *no Man ought to chuse his Religion blindly, and by chance; but that every Man ought to have some Reason for what he professes. Whatever Religion, therefore, a Man is bred up in from his Youth, it certainly is very fit for him, when he comes to Years of Discretion, to enquire into the Grounds and Reasons of it.* For otherwise it is not possible for him to know whether he be in the Right, or the Wrong; in the way to Heaven, or Hell.

III. If there be a God, and if he requires any service or worship (*i.e.* any Religion) from us, it is undoubtedly for this End, that it may be a Trial of our Faithfulness and Obedience to him.

Now,

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Now, whosoever has a mind to prove his Servant, whether he will be faithful and obedient, he will not give him such dark and intricate Commands, as shall puzzle him to find out the meaning of them ; (For, how can a Servant approve himself faithful and obedient, if he be uncertain what it is that his Master requires from him ?) But he will surely give him such Commands and Directions as are easie enough to be understood, however difficult they may be to be enterprized, or accomplished. I conclude therefore, *That all the Duties of Religion, which God requires of any Man, must needs be easie enough for him to understand, however hard they*

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may be to be practised. For, otherwise, Religion would be a Trial rather of a Man's Wit and Cunning, than of his Faithfulness and Obedience. And therefore also - I cannot but conclude, That *most*, if not all the Controversies about Religion, which at this Day distract the World, do not proceed from any Difficulty in or about the Determination of all things necessary in Religion it self; but partly from the Pride of some Learned Men, who have loved to start new and difficult Questions, and to impose their private Sentiments upon the World, that they might be admired for their Wit and Subtilty; partly from the Covetousness and Ambition
of

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of some, whether Learned, or Unlearned, who have found that their Worldly Interest will be better served by some Doctrines (no matter how false and precarious) than by others; and partly from the Prejudice of most Men, who are apt, with great Zeal and Eagerness, to contend for all those things which, from their Childhood, they have been taught to have a Reverence for. And I farther conclude, That whosoever has a sincere desire to embrace True Religion, must lay aside Pride, Ambition, Covetousness and Prejudice, which would mis-guide him; and follow his sober and unprejudicate Reason, which will ever lead him in the right Way.

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IV. There are different sorts, or rather degrees of Assurance, which Men have concerning Things. Some things are evident of themselves, without any Proof; some things we are assured of, by the Testimony of our Senses; some things we receive as Truths, because we find them to follow from other Truths already received; and some things we believe only upon the Testimony of others. Moreover, some things we are persuaded of, without any Doubt or Diffidence; whereas other things do seem, at best, to be but likely or probable, and that too in a different degree, according as their Evidence is stronger, or weaker. Now, every

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every sober Man, where he has certain Evidence of a thing, there he acts with Assurance; where the Matter is but probable, there he proceeds with Caution: But where a Man is under a Necessity of doing one way or other, and where the Matter appears doubtful on both sides, there it becomes him to weigh the Reasons on both parts with due Consideration; and according as he finds the greater Probability to be on the one hand rather than the other, so to square his Actions accordingly. Since therefore every Man must necessarily either live religiously or not live religiously; I conclude, that
if upon a serious Consideration
of

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of the matter, there appear to be more probable Reasons and Arguments for Religion than against it, every wise and sober Man must embrace Religion. This I say, not but that I think there are even demonstrative Arguments for Religion ; and not so much as one probable one against it: But because that which to me seems demonstrative, to another may appear but probable, I thought it fit to note, That every Man in point of common Prudence is obliged to follow Religion, if it does but appear more likely and probable to him than Irreligion.

V. Whether it is possible
for any Agent to produce a
new

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new Being purely out of nothing, may with much shew of Reason be doubted: As also Whether meer Matter alone, without any other Agent or efficient Cause, can ever be able to work it self into any different Species or Forms. But this appears as certain as any thing can be; That where there is neither any Agent or efficient Cause to work, nor any Matter or Subject to be wrought upon, there it is utterly impossible for any thing ever to be produced into Being. Since therefore I find that there are many things which actually have a Being and Existence, I conclude, That *of absolute necessity there must be something*

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thing or other which has been from all Eternity, and never had a Beginning. For otherwise, if we suppose that ever there was a time when nothing at all did exist, it follows, from what has been said, that it would be utterly impossible that any thing ever should be produced into Existence.

VI. Since of necessity we must acknowledge something to have been Eternal, I cannot but conclude, That *the Eternity of such a Being as God is described to be, is much more probable and fit to be believed, than the Eternity of such a Being as I see this World to be.* For when I go about to conceive a Notion of the
Eternity.

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Eternity of the World (I mean in the like Posture that now it is in) there do occur to my Mind such Difficulties, or rather Impossibilities, as I think no Man can digest. For he that affirms the World, as now it stands, to have been Eternal, must of Necessity grant that there has been an Eternal Succession of Men, Beasts, and Vegetables, and that to a number actually infinite : (for if the number be not infinite, how can the Succession have been Eternal?) And yet a number actually infinite to me appears to be a plain Contradiction. For that which is infinite cannot be made bigger, whereas there is no number but may be made bigger

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bigger by the Addition of Units. Again if any one shall affirm that an infinite number is no Contradiction ; and that there has been a Succession of such a number of Beings in the World ; then thus I argue, That if there has been a Succession of an infinite number of Men, Beasts, &c. then, by a Parity of Reason, there has been also a Succession of an infinite number of Days and Nights ; and if so, then likewise of an infinite number of Years too ; (for if the number of Years can be limited, so can that of Days too, since every Year contains just such a certain number of Days.) Now this I suppose must be granted
me

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me, That infinite numbers are equal: (for if one number be less than another, how can it be infinite?) And if so, then it must follow that in the Eternity of the World the number of Years is equal to the number of Days, which is absurd; because every Year contains in its self a number of 365 Days. These Difficulties, or rather Impossibilities, I say, do make the notion of the World's Eternity (I mean as the World now is) to appear to me as an absurd and unreasonable Supposition. But then as to God, Although I confess it to be difficult, and perhaps impossible, for Man to comprehend the manner, how he
is,

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is, or can be, eternal without beginning; yet since the thing it self is so uncontrollably evident that something is so eternal, (though the manner how is to me incomprehensible) I find no other Scruple or Difficulty in admitting the Eternity of God. For though it seems contrary to all Reason to affirm an eternal Succession of divers things, one after another, without a Beginning; yet I can find no manner of Repugnancy in maintaining that there is one immutable Being (*i. e.* God) which never began to be.

VII. Whether the matter, of which this visible world is framed, has existed from all Eternity,

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Eternity, or whether it were produced out of nothing by the Almighty Power of God, is a Question which reason alone, I think, can never determine. But when I contemplate and consider the great Variety, Order, Beauty, and Usefulness, which do evidently appear in all the Parts of the World, as they are placed together, and answer one another; I cannot but conclude, That *the whole World, and all its Parts, are contriv'd, framed and fashioned, by a wise and powerful Being, whom we call God*: As when I see a curious Clock or Engine, I presently conclude that it was made and contrived by some Artist; and should laugh at that

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that Man who would offer to say that it was formed and fashioned only by chance.

VIII. That Miracles (*i. e.* wonderful Works, surpassing the ordinary course of Nature and Power of Art) have been wrought for Confirmation of the Truth of Religion, is a thing that I shall take for granted at present, because it will appear to be proved beyond any just Exception in the Sequel of this Discourse; And from thence, I think I may most reasonably conclude, That *there is a being Superiour to Nature, who can command and controll it as he pleases, i. e.* in other Terms, That *there is a God.*

IX. The

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IX. The Histories of all Ages, and Travellers into all Countries, do universally concur in this Testimony, That there is no Nation or People, whether learned or unlearned, but what do own the being of a God. And those few Persons who have presumed to deny it, have ever been look'd on as Prodigies and Monsters of Mankind. Furthermore, even those few who have denied the Being of God, have ever been Men of such debauched and profligate Lives, that we have great Reason to believe that they first have wished that there might be no God to punish them; and then, without any other ground or Reason,

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Reason, have believed, or rather pretended to believe, what they have wished. For it is almost ever observed, that when debauched and atheistical Persons do draw near to Death, they do either renounce their Atheism, own the being of a God, and make Supplication to him ; or at least have their Minds possess'd with such doubts and fears, as plainly shew that they have still a strong Suspicion that there likely may be a God, for ought they know, who will call them to an Account for all their Wickedness. Since then all sorts of Men, both learned and unlearned, and all Nations of Men, both civil and barbarous,

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rous, have always owned the Being of God; since his being has never been denied but by very few indeed; since that denial has rather proceeded from their Wishes and Desires, than from their Reason and Understanding; and lastly, since they have not been able wholly to extinguish the Belief of a God out of their Minds although they have earnestly endeavoured it; I conclude, That *the Belief of a God, in Man, is neither the Effect of Chance, because 'tis Universal, nor of Ignorance, because it possesses the most Learned, nor of State-Policy, because 'tis received among the most barbarous and unciviliz'd People; but*
that

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that *there is a God, who has made all Men, and has (as a Token of his Work) stamped and engraved this his Mark and Character upon them.*

X. There is no Man of common Sense, who builds a convenient and goodly Structure, but he takes care likewise to keep it in good Order and Repair, after it is built. And there is no Fabrick but, in Tract of Time, will visibly decay, if constant care be not taken of it. Since therefore, God has erected and framed this goodly Structure of the World; and since in so long a time there is no Manner of decay to be found in it (as is abundantly proved by *Hackwell*, in his *Apology*

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pology on this Subject) I conclude, That God, *not only made this World by his Power, but also governs it by his Providence.* And for the only Objection, which seems to be of any Force against God's Providence; namely, that wicked Men do often thrive and prosper, whilst good and Vertuous Men are oppressed with Misery; it is most easily and naturally solved, by supposing, (what shall anon be proved) That there are abundant Rewards for good Men, and sufficient punishments for the wicked, to be distributed in a Life which is to come; which will bring all things to be equal at the last.

B XI. Every

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XI. Every Parent, who begets and brings up a Child ; every Master, who feeds and pays a Servant ; every Prince, who governs and protects his Subjects ; and every Benefactor, who does any act of Kindness for another ; may very reasonably, and do always, expect a Return of Love, Obedience and Gratitude, in due Proportion to the Benefits received from them. Since then *God* is more than a Parent to us, for he made us and our Parents too ; since he is so kind a Master, who gives us our Food, and all the Conveniences of Life ; since he governs and protects us, by his over-ruling Providence, more effectually
than

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than any earthly Prince does his Subjects; And lastly, since he is our greatest and supreme Benefactor, who has given us all the good which we possess and enjoy; I cannot but conclude, that *he expects a return of Love, Obedience and Gratitude from us* (I will not say proportionable to the Benefits received from him, for that, perhaps, may exceed our Ability; but) *proportionable unto our Ability or Capacity.*

XII. That God is wise and powerful, I gather from his Work, which I contemplate in the Visible World. And from thence I conclude, That *he will sufficiently punish those Persons who despise him, so far as not to love, thank and*
B 2 obey

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obey him, according as he expects and requires from them. That he is also good and gracious, I gather from those good things which he has bestowed upon us, relating both to our Bodies and Minds. And from thence I conclude, That *he will abundantly reward all those persons who take care to pay him that Love, Gratitude and Obedience which he expects.*

XIII. That these Rewards and Punishments are not finally distributed in this Life is very evident: Because we often see Men, that are notoriously wicked, enjoy all the pleasures; and others, that are conspicuously vertuous, undergo almost all the Calamities of this World, even unto their

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their very Graves. I conclude therefore, That *there is another Life, after this, in which these Rewards and Punishments shall be duly distributed.*

XIV. When a Man is once convinced that there is a God, to whom there is a Service due; and that there are Rewards and Punishments to be dispensed to all Men, according as they have performed or neglected that Service the grand Enquiry that every Man is concerned to make, is, What he must do to avoid these Punishments, and to be made Partaker of these Rewards. And here I think I may most easily and naturally make these following

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Conclusions; viz. 1. *He who does what God requires from him shall not be punished but rewarded.* 2. *God requires from every Man that he should use his honest Endeavour, by all means, to know and understand his Will as perfectly as he can.* For this is but Reason for every Master to expect from his Servant; much more for such a Master as God. 3. *If a Man does his heartiest and best Endeavour, first to know and then to perform the Will of God; God will require no more from him.* For to me it seems utterly inconsistent, with the Wisdom of God to expect, and with his Goodness to require, any more from a Man than what he is able to perform;

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form ; *i. e.* any more than his best and most hearty Endeavours.

XV. There are, in the general, but two ways of finding out, and knowing the Will of God. The one is by the use of our natural Reason and Understanding ; the other is by attending to that Revelation which God has made of his Will, to the World. Here then I conclude, *I must make it my Business, first to enquire into the Truth and Reality of this Revelation ; and then, to make use of that, and my Reason together, in order to find out what is God's Will.*

XVI. That there was such a Person as *Jesus of Nazareth*, in *Galilee*, in the time of *Tibe.*

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rius Caesar, the *Roman* Emperor ; That he had a Company of poor Men for his Disciples ; That He and his Disciples went about the Country of *Judea*, Teaching and Preaching ; That he was put to death upon the Cross, after the *Roman* manner, under *Pontius Pilate*, the *Roman* Governor of *Judea* ; That after his Death, his Disciples went about into all, or most, Parts of the then known World, Teaching and Preaching that this Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and Saviour of the World, and that he was risen from the Dead, and gone into Heaven ; That in a few Years they converted a very great Number of People, in all places, to this Belief ;

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Belief ; That the Professors of this 'Belief' were called Christians ; That they were most cruelly persecuted, and many Thousands of them put to death, and that with most exquisite Torments, for no other Reason, but because they were Christians; That these Persecutions were several times renewed against them, for the space of about Three Hundred Years ; And yet, for all this, that the Number of Christians daily increased, and that not only Ideots and Unlearned Men, but great Scholars and Philosophers were converted to Christianity, even in the Times of Persecution ; All this, being merely Matter of Fact, was never yet

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denied

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denied by the greatest Enemies of Christian Religion. And, indeed, these things are so abundantly testified by the Histories, and other Writings, of those Times; and have been so generally receiv'd for Truth, as well by the Opposers, as Believers of Christianity, by a constant, universal, and uninterrupted Tradition, from those Days, even unto this Time; that a Man may as well deny the Truth of any, or of all, the Histories of the World, as of this. Now, since all Men generally have a strong Inclination to retain and stick to that Religion (whatever it be) in which both they and their Fathers have been brought up; and no less an Aversion to all
cause.

causeless Innovations in Matters of Religion ; Moreover, since all Men, without exception, who are in their Wits, have naturally a most earnest desire to preserve their Lives as long as they can, and to keep themselves free from Pain and Trouble ; I think I may reasonably conclude, that *there must have been some extraordinary strong, and even irresistible Motive, which could prevail upon such Multitudes of People to forsake theirs and their Ancestors old Religion, and to embrace Christianity, which then had but newly appeared in the World, and which, in those Days, did seldom fail to involve its Profelytes in most grievous Troubles and Persecutions.*

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XVII. That this Motive could not be the Hopes of any Profit or Advantage in this Life, is most evident : Because Christianity was, in those Days, most commonly persecuted, even unto death. It must therefore, of necessity, be the hopes of some Benefit or Happiness which should accrue to them, after this Life was at an end. And this Benefit or Happiness could not seem small and inconsiderable to them ; nor could the Hope which they conceived of it be weak, or doubtful : For there is scarce any Man, or ever was, in the World, who would run himself into certain Misery and Persecution, even to the losing of his Life, only upon a
weak

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weak and doubtful Hope of some small and inconsiderable Benefit or Happiness to be enjoyed in a Life to come. I conclude therefore, That the Primitive Christians were undoubtedly possessed with a strong Belief, and most firm Persuasion, That whosoever should truly embrace, profess, and live according to, the Christian Religion in this Life, was certainly to be made Partaker of some great and inestimable Happiness in the Life to come.

XVIII. That this Belief and Persuasion did not proceed from any Frenzy, or Madness, (which sometimes possesses Men with very strong Imaginations,) is very evident; both because there was such a Multitude

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titude of them, who exactly agreed in the same Sentiments; and also, because it appears, both from the Writings and Actions of the Primitive Christians, that they were Men of Reason and Sobriety, and some of them Persons of great Learning. As evident also it is, that it could not proceed from the Force of any Argument, drawn from the Principles of bare Natural Reason, without Revelation. For, What Man in his Wits, without pretending some Revelation from Heaven, could ever be persuaded, that the Embracing of the Religion taught by such a particular Person, more than another, would make him happy in the Life to come? I conclude

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clude therefore, That *the Disciples of Jesus, who preached Christianity abroad in the World, did convince and satisfy their Profelytes, that it was revealed by God from Heaven, that whosoever would believe on Jesus, and receive, and live according to, his Religion, should be made very happy in the next Life.*

XIX. The main Argument which the first Preachers of Christianity made use of, to convince the World that this was a Divine Revelation, was this; *viz.* Because that Jesus, in his Life-time, did perform such and so many Miracles, and wonderful Works, as sufficiently shewed, that he had his Commission and Power from

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from God ; and because his Disciples (whom he had appointed to teach his Religion to the World) for many Years after his Death, did likewise continue to work many Miracles in the Name of Jesus ; Which shewed, that God was with them in what they did and taught. The things by them alledged to have been performed by Jesus, were such as these : That he healed all manner of Diseases and Distempers with a Touch, or barely with a Word speaking ; That he gave Sight to the Blind, Hearing to the Deaf, Speech to the Dumb, and Strength and Agility to the Lame and Maimed ; That he raised several Persons from the Dead ;
and

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and that he himself arose from the Dead, after he had been crucified, and a Spear thrust into his Vitals, and had lay'n dead in a Sepulchre unto the Third Day ; And lastly, That, after his Resurrection, having several times appeared to his Disciples, and conversed with them, for the space of Forty Days, he was, at last, openly, and in their sight, taken up alive into Heaven. The things alledged to have been done by his Disciples, were, The Healing the Sick, the Lame, the Maimed, &c. and, in a particular manner, their Speaking all Languages, although they never had learned them. That all these things were pretended by the first Preachers of Chri-

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Christianity, is confessed on all Hands. And, undoubtedly, they must needs, at least, *pretend* something that was very extraordinary, or else they never could have converted such vast Multitudes, under so many Disadvantages as they and their Religion laboured. That these things were not only pretended, but really and actually performed, is, in my Opinion, uncontrollably evinced from the Testimony of the Disciples themselves, Who declared these things for Truth unto the World; Who could not themselves be deceived in those Matters of Fact, of which they pretended to have been Eye-Witnesses; Who never would go about to impose a Lye

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Lye upon the World, by which they could propose to themselves no manner of Advantage in this Life, nor (if it were a Lye) in the Life to come; Who never would have exposed themselves to Poverty, to Racks, to Gibbets, to Fire and Faggot, (in a Word) to all sorts of Torments and Deaths, only for the sake of a fruitless and unprofitable Fable; Who being Men of unblameable Lives, for their Morality, had, doubtless, more Honesty and Integrity, than to affirm those things for certain Truths, which they must needs know to be mere Inventions; Who were too many in number, and too void of Craft and Guile, to combine together.

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together in framing a false Story, and none of them ever to betray or discover the Cheat ; Who could never hope to impose the Belief of such a Story upon a curious and inquisitive Age (such as that was wherein they lived) if it had been false, and therefore would certainly never have attempted it, if they had not known it to have been true ; And, Lastly, who, instead of convincing such Multitudes as they did, must needs have been palpably discovered, and exposed to the World for a Company of lewd Cheats and Impostors, in pretending that such and such things were done in the Land of *Judea* and *Jerusalem*, (and done openly too,

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too, in the Face of the World,) when it was so easie a matter to go or send to the place, to make Enquiry, and so to find out the Cheat, if a Cheat it had been. But that these same Miracles, and wonderful Works, did far surpass both the Course of Nature, and the Power of Art, is very evident: That they were not perform'd by the Assistance of any wicked Spirit, does sufficiently appear; because the very Intent and Design of them was to propagate a Doctrine in the World, which, by all, must be allowed to teach the purest, and most strict Morality; to which it cannot be imagined, that any Impure and Evil Spirit would contribute any help.
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It remains therefore, that these things must needs have been performed, either by the immediate Power and Assistance of God, (who is both the Framer and Controller of Nature) or (which is the same thing in effect) by the Mediation and Ministry of good Spirits, who always act obediently to his Will. So that (whether mediately, or immediately) it is God who is to be looked upon as the Original and Author of all those wonderful Things, which were done by Jesus, and his Disciples. Now then; Since God did interpose his Power, to work such strange and stupenduous things, for the Propagation and Confirmation of that Doctrine which was taught

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taught by Jesus and his Disciples ; This, I think, is a sufficient Demonstration, that their Doctrine was certainly true. For, Who can imagine that God should make use of his extraordinary Power, only to cheat and deceive the World into the Belief of a Lye? I conclude therefore, That *the Primitive Christians had sufficient Reason to believe, that it was revealed by God from Heaven, that whosoever would believe on Jesus, and receive, and live according to his Religion, should be made very happy in the next Life* ; this very thing being the grand Point of Doctrine, which Jesus and his Disciples taught and preached to the World. And if we are
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sure that the Primitive Christians had Reason sufficient to believe this ; from hence it follows, *That we have sufficient Reason to believe it also.*

XX. But Jesus himself being long since ascended into Heaven, and his Disciples, who first preached the Gospel, departed out of the World ; here, *I think, it is necessary to enquire, to whom, or to what I must apply my self, that* (amidst the several Parties in the World, who all call themselves True and Orthodox Christians, each condemning all others but themselves) *I may be truly and surely informed what is the true and genuine Religion or Doctrine of Jesus, which I ought to receive, and live according*

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to, in order to my future Happiness. For, if I do not this, I must either reject the Doctrine of Jesus, and so lose my future Happiness; or else take it altogether upon Trust, and by chance, and then 'tis odds but I light upon the wrong, and must needs run a very great hazard. And though he who is in a Mistake, and cannot tell how to help it, will, doubtless, find an easie Pardon from God; yet he who falls into Errour, for want of moderate Care and Diligence to find out the Truth, has, I think, no pretence either to Pardon, or so much as to Pity.

XXI. The *Roman Catholics* do tell me, that I must apply my self to the Church.

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This Church they define to be, that Society of Persons who profess Faith in Jesus Christ, and live in Subjection to, and Communion with the Pope, or Bishop of *Rome*. This Church they say is infallible; and not only does not, but cannot err in any Doctrine of Religion. Go then, say they, to this Church, and receive the Doctrine which she teaches; and there you have, certainly and infallibly, the true and pure Doctrine of Jesus Christ. But I cannot give my Assent to follow this their Direction, because I find such great Difficulties in my way as, I think, are insuperable; at least, I am sure, such as I am not able to overcome. For, *First*, Although
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it may be a certain Truth, that there shall always be a Church, that is to say, a Company of People, some where or other, professing the true Christian Religion, as long as the World shall last ; yet what solid Proof can be brought, that this particular Society of Men, who live in Communion with the Pope, or Bishop of *Rome*, are alone the true Church, and shall always keep and maintain amongst them the true and uncorrupt Doctrine of Jesus Christ ? This Matter being a Question of Revelation, and positive Institution, is incapable of being proved by any Argument drawn from Natural Reason. And, as for the Texts of Scripture which they

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alledge, it is even ridiculous to think, that any sober and unprejudiced Person should be convinced by them ; (as will evidently appear to any one, who impartially reads what the *Romish* and Protestant Divines have written on this Controversie :) For there are none of those Texts, but are fairly and naturally capable of another Interpretation ; and must be very much strained and wrested, to make them countenance the *Romish* Doctrine. Besides that, the Divines of the Church of *Rome* do generally teach, That no Man can be sure of the Authority or Sense of any Text of Scripture, (especially if it appear to be any way doubtful,) except he receives
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the Proposal and Interpretation thereof from this their Church, which they say is infallible. So that a Man must of necessity believe the Infallibility of their Church, before he can any way be sure of the Credit, or even of the Sense, of those Texts of Scripture which they bring to prove it. And then, What need is there of Scripture-Arguments to prove a thing, which must be acknowledged, before the Arguments can have any force, or even be as much as certainly understood? And if they tell me, that the Fathers, and ancient Christian Writers, do testify thus much of the Church of *Rome*; I can only say, that the Protestant Divines (who

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seem to me to be Men of as much Learning and Integrity as the *Romish*) do declare, that it is far otherwise. Nor have I Skill enough in Language and Antiquity, to take upon me to judge of this Dispute. Neither do I understand, by what Authority the Writings of those Persons, who are acknowledged to have been subject to Errours, should be obtruded on me as a Rule of my Faith, or as a sufficient Argument to determine my Assent in so weighty a Matter. *Secondly*, Supposing, but not granting, that in the Church of *Rome* the true and pure Doctrine of Jesus Christ was preserved; yet still it is granted, that particular and private Men,

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Men, who live in the visible Communion of that Church, may teach false and corrupt Doctrine. Here then I demand, How shall I certainly distinguish the Doctrine of the Church, from the Opinions of private Men? And how shall I certainly know what is the true Meaning of the Church's Doctrine? They of the Church of *Rome* are not agreed who it is, that has Authority to declare and expound the Doctrine of their Church; whether it be the Pope, or a General Council; or neither alone, but both together. Or if they were unanimous in this Point, yet how shall I know whether such a particular Person, who possesses the Chair, be a true

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and lawful Pope; or such a particular Assembly, a true and lawful General Council? Or, Suppose they could satisfy me in this Demand, yet there is no Council now sitting; nor, if there were, could I go to them, or to the Pope, to receive Instruction; nor can the Pope, or a Council, be at leisure to satisfy the Demands of every private Enquirer. How then can I be sure that this or that particular Person does both rightly understand, and faithfully propose the Doctrine of the Church to me? Especially, since there have been, and still are, eminent Members of the Church of *Rome*, who have accused each other of corrupt Doctrine, and even
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of Heresie it self. But, *Thirdly and Lastly*, There do appear to me to be much stronger Arguments to prove that the Church of *Rome* has actually erred, and corrupted the Doctrine of Jesus Christ, (in the Case of Transubstantiation, and some other her Tenents,) than any that can be brought, to prove her to be infallible. And until I can be otherwise convinced, I cannot but conclude, That *to follow the Guidance of the Roman Church, is not the way to embrace the true and pure Doctrine of Jesus.*

XXII. Some there are who tell me, that, to find out the true and genuine Doctrine of Jesus, I must have recourse to the Tradition of the Church:

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And thus they set forth the Matter. *First*, They suppose that the true and genuine Doctrine of Jesus was undoubtedly taught by his Apostles, and first Disciples. *Secondly*, That if any one did, or should have gone about to spread any false or spurious Doctrine, whilst these Apostles and Disciples were yet alive; They who were sent on purpose, by Jesus, to preach his Doctrine, and were owned, and submitted to accordingly by all Christian Churches, both could and would immediately convince all Churches of the falseness or spuriousness of such pretended Doctrine. *Thirdly*, That the Doctrine of Jesus being in all Churches publickly

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ly and constantly taught and preached, every succeeding Age and Generation must needs know, and could not possibly be ignorant, what their Fathers, and immediate Predecessors owned and taught as such. *Fourthly*, That therefore, if, at any time whatsoever, any new or spurious Doctrine was, or should be, vented, by any Person or Persons, as the Doctrine of Jesus, all Christians must presently know that this was none of his Doctrine, because it was not taught them as such, by their immediate Predecessors. *Fifthly*, That therefore it is impossible that any new and spurious Doctrine could ever be broached in the World, as a
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part of the Doctrine of Jesus, but it must needs meet with great Opposition : For all Christians do maintain, That it is a Sin to teach, or knowingly to own, any thing as the Doctrine of Jesus, which is not really so. *Sixthly*, That however some Men, out of Pride or Interest, may own and contend for any such novel Doctrines, yet it is impossible that any such Doctrine should ever come to be universally received by the whole Church, except we could suppose, either that the whole Church should joyn together to involve themselves and their Posterity for ever in a Sin ; or else, that a few Men, who first should vent an Opinion, could so impose upon the whole

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whole World, as to make them believe, that what they all must know to be a new and upstart thing (because they received it not from their Fathers and Predecessors) was a part of the ancient Doctrine of Jesus, which was all along, from Hand to Hand, delivered down to them: Both which things are absurd to conceive or imagine. And *Lastly*, That no part of the Doctrine of Jesus, once delivered, could ever be obliterated, or wholly forgot in the World; because every Age of Christians, from the very first, who undoubtedly received the whole and entire Doctrine of Jesus, knew themselves to be indispensably obliged, both by
God's

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God's Command, and also by that Love and Charity which they owed to their Posterity, to teach the same full and entire Doctrine which they received, unto their Children, and those who were to come after them. Go therefore to the Church (that is, to the Church of *Rome*, say the Papists; to the Universal Church, *i. e.* to all Christians, say some Protestants,) and see what are the Doctrines which are, and have been universally maintained; of whose Beginning no other Account can be given, but that Jesus and his Apostles taught them to the World: And there you have the entire and uncorrupted Doctrine of Jesus. But to this I answer,
That,

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That, indeed, where there is an universal, or a very large and general Tradition concerning any thing; and where, from the nature of the thing itself, it appears to be highly rational and probable, that there is not, or could not be, any Error or Mistake in the matter; in such a Case as this, no Man, I think, but an obstinate Sceptick, will offer to withstand the Evidence of such a Tradition. But, let a Tradition be ever so general, or even universal; yet, if it can be shewn, that there is not only a possibility, but also a fair likelihood, and probability, that there may be a mistake in the business; then, I think, no Man can justly be blamed, if he

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he refuses or suspends his Assent, until the Testimony of such a Tradition be cleared and vindicated from those rational Prejudices and Exceptions which may lie against it. Now, if it were so, that all Errours and Mistakes did ever immediately appear in their perfect Form, and full Growth, at their very Beginning ; then it were most rational to conclude, that all Men must needs take notice of their first Appearance ; and consequently, that, in all likelihood, any such Errour must needs meet with many more Opponents, than Abettors. But, on the contrary ; it may well be supposed, that Errours may have sprung up in the World, from such
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small beginnings, and by such slow and unperceivable degrees, that, after some Ages, it may be impossible for a Man to discover them to be Errours, except he has some other Rule, besides Tradition, to try them by; *viz.* either the Rule of common Reason, or some ancient and unaltered Writing. As for Example: Is it not rational to conceive, that, in the first Ages of Christianity, they who preached and writ popular Discourses, might, very innocently, and to good purpose, make use of Rhetorical Flights, and Figurative Expressions, to strike the Fancies, and move the Affections of the People to Vertue and Piety? And is it not likely enough, That those
who

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who came after them, might not only strive to imitate, but also to out-do them, in bolder Flights, and more strained Schemes of Expression? And is it not also probable enough, That, in long process of Time, Ignorance, generally overspreading the Face of the World, and being joined with a profound Veneration for those ancient Preachers and Writers, might begin to interpret some of these Rhetorical and Figurative Expressions in a Literal and Logical Sence; and then conceive, that such their Interpretations were really and truly the ancient Doctrines delivered down to them? Especially if we consider, that there may have been
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some Men of great Power and Repute in the World, who might have taken a pride and delight, or whose Interest it might have been, to amuze the People with mysterious Notions and Fancies, and to keep them ignorant of the Truth. And thus it appears to be, not only possible, but also probable enough, That Errors and Mistakes, as to the ancient Doctrine of Jesus, might come to be generally received, without any considerable or notorious Opposition given to them; or that such Opposition might soon be suppressed and over-ruled by the Power and Reputation of such prevailing Men. From all which I can but conclude,
That

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That *though the general Tradition or Testimony of the Church may be a good Help, yet it may not always be a certain Rule, to lead me to the entire, and unaltered Doctrine of Jesus.*

XXIII. Others there are, who tell me, That, to find out the true and entire Doctrine of Jesus, I must apply my self to the holy Scripture; that is to say, to the Books commonly called the *Old*, and the *New Testament*. And because I look upon this to be the right Way, I shall briefly and plainly deliver my Thoughts, in relation to these Books. And first, of the *New Testament*. That the *New Testament*, as it was extant in the Greek Tongue, has been ever universally owned
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by all Christians, as containing a true (though some deny it to be a full) Account of the Life and Doctrine of Jesus, is a thing so notorious, and so universally acknowledged, that I cannot find the least Ground or Reason to question it. Now the History and Doctrine of Jesus being so well known unto the first Christians, by the Preaching of his Apostles and Disciples ; and they being so ready, upon all Occasions, to lay down their Lives for the Truth of Christianity ; it cannot be imagined that ever they would so readily and universally receive and own such a Book, if it had contained any thing in it which was dissonant from that Doctrine which they

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they had received. It is confessed, indeed, that some of those Books which make up the Volume of the *New Testament*, (that is to say, the Epistle to the *Hebrews*, that of *St. James*, the Second of *St. Peter*, that of *St. Jude*, the Second and Third of *St. John*, and the *Revelations*,) were not so soon, and so universally received, throughout the Christian Church, as the rest of the Books were. The Reason of which, apparently, was not, That these Books contained any thing in them contrary to what was delivered in the other Books of the *New Testament*, (for he that reads the whole, will plainly find, that there is a very compleat Agreement

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ment between them; the only seeming Discord, of *St. Paul's* Justification by Faith, and *St. James's* Justification by Works, being exactly and fully reconciled, by considering, That *St. Paul* means no other Faith, but such as worketh by Love, *Gal. 5. 6.* and *St. James*, no other Works, but such as proceed from Faith; *Jam. 2. 22.*) But because it was not at first universally known, who were the Authors of them. Which abundantly shews the Care and Caution of the Christian Church, in not being hasty to receive and admit any Books, as authentick Records of their Doctrine, without very good Warrant for so doing. And therefore, 'since these same
Books

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Books were, in a very little time after, received, and owned to be of equal Authority with the rest of the *New Testament*; I cannot but from thence conclude, That those Churches which, at the first, doubted concerning these Books, did soon receive most full and ample Satisfaction in that matter, from those who had before received them. I conclude therefore, That *the Book of the New Testament, as it was extant in the Primitive Times, in the Greek Tongue, did contain a true Account of the Doctrine of Jesus.*

XXIV. That innumerable Copies of the *New Testament* were, in a very little time, dispersed through all places where

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where Christianity was planted ; That it has been, at different times, and in very distant places, translated into all (or almost all) Languages ; And that Copies, both of the Original, and many of the several Translations, have been preserved with much Care, in a great many distant Parts of the World, is allowed by all, and denied by none. From whence I think we may gather, *First, That where the Generality of the Greek Copies of the New Testament do agree in the very same Words, there we have, undoubtedly, the true and authentic Words of the New Testament.* For, although some Mistakes might creep into some Copies, either through

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the Wickedness or Negligence of some particular Men ; yet, where so many Copies of a Book have been so carefully preserved, and in such distant Parts of the World, it is not to be imagined, that the self-same Errour, in any Expression, should ever be propagated through the Generality of them. Secondly, That *where the Words or Expressions of divers Greek Copies do differ one from another ; yet if the Sense and Meaning be exactly the same in all, or almost all ; there we have certainly the true Sense and Meaning of the New Testament.* For it is easie to apprehend, that a Transcriber might, by a small Mistake, put one Word or Expression of the
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same Signification, instead of another : But that the same Sense should be punctually preserved in all, or almost all, Copies, is not to be imagined, except it were the true Sense delivered from the Beginning. Thirdly, *That if there may be found any different Readings in divers Copies of the New Testament, which disagree in Sense, as well as in Words, (which scarce ever happens in any thing which is accounted a material Point of Religion) then it seems to be most fit and proper to admit of that Reading and Sense which best agrees with the Tenour of the whole ; with the ancientest, and best esteemed Translations ; and with the evident Principles of sound Reason.*

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And if any place be so obscure, as that none of these Ways will afford any Light into its Meaning, then I think that no stress ought to be laid upon it in any necessary part of Religion.

XXV. But some will demand, How are we sure of the Sense and Meaning, even of those places of the *New Testament*, where there is no difference about the Words? In Answer to this, I have already shewn, (§. 21.) that we are not to follow the Guidance of the Church of *Rome*, to know the true Doctrine of Jesus; Nor therefore, consequently, to know the true Meaning of the *New Testament*, in which his Doctrine is owned to be contained. I have shewn also, (§. 22.)

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(§. 22.) That though general Tradition may be a good Help, yet may it not always be a certain Rule to lead one to the unaltered Doctrine of Jesus; nor therefore, consequently, to the true and genuine Interpretation of the *New Testament*.

Since therefore there is no other way to be found, I conclude, That *the New Testament is to be interpreted the same way that other Books are*; that is, by considering the Sense and Propriety of the Words and Sentences, and the ordinary Figures of Speech, as they are commonly used in the same Book, and in others written in the same Language, and about the same time; together with the Scope,

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Drift, Coherence, and Occasion of the Discourse. *To which End, every Man that is learned, being bound to use his best Endeavour to know the Will of God, (as I have shewn, §. 14.) is obliged, according to the measure of his Learning, to consult Lexicons, Commentators, and ancient Writers, and to use all other Helps; that he may both satisfy himself, and also be able to inform others.*

XXVI. But perhaps I shall be told, That when a Man has done all this, to the best of his power, yet, after all, he may be mistaken; as it appears, that many Learned Men are; since they oppose and contradict one another about the Meaning of the *New Testament*. To this I answer,

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swer, That since I have shewn, (§. 3.) that all necessary things (whether as to Belief, or Practice) in Religion, are easie to be understood; I must from hence conclude, That a *sober and honest Enquirer cannot easily be mistaken in the Interpretation of those places of the New Testament, which do contain any necessary part of Religion.* And as for other parts and passages of it; if Men would be but peaceable, (which is plainly enough commanded in the *New Testament*;) their Mistakes about them could do no harm. And, again; Since I have shewn, (§. 14.) That God requires no more from a Man, but his best Endeavours to know and perform his Will;

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I do hence conclude, That if a Man be mistaken in his Interpretation even of any such place as contains some necessary part of Religion; yet, if this Mistake be purely an Error of the Understanding, and does not proceed from any Neglect, or wilful Fault of the Person so mistaking; God will never be offended with him for it. And then, What hurt can there be in such a Mistake as this?

XXVII. But it may be demanded, What shall they do to find out the Meaning of the *New Testament*, who do not understand any thing of the Greek, which is the only authentick Language of this Book? Which is evidently the Cause of much the greatest part of
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of Mankind. I answer, That *he who is ignorant of the Greek Tongue, being yet obliged to use his best Endeavour, (§. 14.) must do the best he can, by reading some Translation, or Translations of it; (or, if he cannot read himself, by hearing them read;) and by asking and enquiring from such of his Acquaintance as he believes to be Persons of Sincerity and Knowledge, to know what is the Sense and Doctrine of the New Testament, and the Will of God therein contained. And, since God requires no more from any Man, but his best Endeavour, (§. 14.) it follows, That if such a Man be mistaken, and cannot help it, God will not be offended with him neither for it.*

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XXVIII. And one thing more let me add, for the sake of those who are not skilled in the Greek Tongue ; *viz.* That since there have many Translations been made of the *New Testament*, most of them by Persons well skilled in Languages, of good Repute for their Honesty and Integrity, and who could not but know before-hand, that their Translations would be narrowly sifted and examined by learned Men ; (which must needs make them careful to commit as few Faults as they could ;) and since all those things which God requires from Men, must needs be easie enough to be understood, (§ 3.) and therefore easie to be translated and expressed

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pressed in any Language ; I cannot but conclude, That a *sober and impartial Enquirer* may be very well assured of the Doctrine of Jesus, even from the Translations of the New Testament, though he does not understand the Greek Original. And, for as much as I can understand of the matter, if Men did stand only upon the honest and downright Sense and Meaning of plain Places, (which only can give us good Assurance in Religion,) and would not quarrel about critical Niceties in such Texts as are confessedly obscure, I believe there is scarce any Translation of the *New Testament* so defective, but might be a sufficient Guide to any sober Man, to
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lead him to the Doctrine of Jesus.

XXIX. Having thus spoken what I designed of the *New Testament*, I come to say something of the *Old*. And here, that the *Jews*, in the Days of Jesus, had among them a Book, written in the *Hebrew*, and some small part of it in the *Chaldee-Tongue*, which we now call the *Old Testament*, which they called the *Holy Scripture*, and esteemed as the Word of God, is a thing beyond dispute. That this Book was owned and acknowledged, quoted and referred to, and all People exhorted and encouraged to search and study it, as the Word of God, both by Jesus himself, and also by his Disciples,

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sciples, is most evident to any one who reads the *New Testament*. From whence I must conclude, That *the Doctrine of that Book, as it was then extant, is to be esteemed as part of the Doctrine of Jesus; and that those Laws and Commands which are there to be found, are to be kept and observed by all Christians, the Followers of Jesus; except where it can be shewn that Jesus has freed us from the Obligation of them.*

XXX. Moreover, since this Book has been translated into as many Languages, and as many Copies of the Original have been carefully kept, in distant Parts of the World, as of the *New Testament*; I do conclude, That *the very same things*

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things which just now were said concerning the Words, the Meaning, and Way of interpreting the New Testament, will hold good concerning the Old Testament also, as far as they can be accommodated to it.

XXXI. There are some certain Books and Fragments, which among the Protestants are well known by the Name of *Apocryphal*, to which the Papists give the Title of *Deuterocanonical*. These Pieces the Papists contend to be a real part of the *Old Testament*, and of equal Authority with the other Books of it: But the Protestants will not allow their Authority to be sacred, although they grant that there are many useful and profitable things
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contained in them. Now, he that is not able to search into Antiquity, for the Resolving of this Controversie, may by another way be satisfied about it. For, since the *Jews* (from whom the Christians originally received the Scriptures of the *Old Testament*) do all of them, and ever did, unanimously reject these same *Apocryphal* Books and Fragments, as being no part of their Holy Scripture; I think it may from hence be sufficiently concluded, That, *as to the Controversie about the Apocryphal Scripture, the Protestants are in the right, and the Papists in the wrong.* And yet, if the Authority of those Pieces were as great as the Papists would have

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have it, I see not how it could make any Alteration in my Religion. For I do not find any thing in them, but what is easily reconcilable with the rest of the holy Scripture.

XXXII. But there are some Difficulties which seem to arise concerning what I have discoursed, to which it will be necessary to give a full and satisfactory Answer. And, *First*, If all be granted that has hitherto been said ; yet, how shall I be sure that the Book of the holy Scriptures contains, not only truly, but also fully and entirely, the Doctrine of Jesus ; so that nothing is to be esteemed as a part of his Religion, but what is contained in the Scripture ? To this I might

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might answer, That there are several Passages in the Scripture it self, which do give us to understand, that the whole Law and Will of God, as far as it is needful for Man to know them, are contained in those holy Writings; (as the Protestant Divines do sufficiently make appear, in the Management of this Controversie against the Papists.) But, waving this, I think it is enough to say, That *it is not, indeed, impossible in it self, but that Jesus might have made known other Particulars of Doctrine, and of the Will of God, besides what is consigned to us by the Scripture. And if any Man can effectually prove, that any such Doctrine or Precept was delivered by him;*
I think,

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I think, that whosoever is convinced of the Proof, ought to believe that Doctrine, and obey that Precept, which appear to be so delivered. But he that does his hearty and sincere Endeavour to find out the Doctrine and Will of God, delivered to Man by Jesus, and is not able, with all his Diligence, to discover any more of it, than what is recorded in the Scripture ; if he faithfully keeps, and observes as much of it as he is able there to discover, it is plain that God requires no more from him, (§. 14.) and therefore certainly will not punish him, for want of any thing farther.

XXXIII. *Secondly, It may be objected, That in Reading these Books, there do appear to be some Passages which are in them-*

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themselves absurd, and contrary to the plain Dictates of every Man's Reason and Understanding ; and some which are irreconcilable with one another. Now, that the Doctrine of Jesus is certainly true, must be allowed, because it is confirmed by God. That both parts of a Contradiction cannot be true, is acknowledged by all Men : And no Man, I think, can own that for a Truth, which is contrary to the plain Dictates of his Reason and Understanding ; which to every Man is, and must be, the Standard of all Truth whatsoever. For there can be no Reason why any Man receives and owns any thing for a Truth, but only because
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he apprehends it to be conformable unto the plain and self-evident Notions which are already planted in his Mind. Here then it may be demanded how it can be possible that these Scriptures should contain the *true and uncorrupted Doctrine and Religion of Jesus?* To this I answer: *First, That I cannot find any appearance of a Contradiction, throughout the Holy Scriptures, in any Point of Doctrine, or Rule of Manners, but what is so easie and obvious to be reconciled, that no Man, I think, of Candour and Ingenuity, but would be ashamed to object it. Secondly, And, as for those few seeming Discordances, which do occur in the Circumstances of some Historical Nar-*

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Narrations ; though I, perhaps, am not able to reconcile them, yet it may be that the things themselves may not be absolutely irreconcilable. But suppose they were, yet it is no derogation to the Truth of the History, (as to the main substance of it,) or of the Doctrine contained in the holy Scriptures, that some of the Sacred Writers have been mistaken in the Relation of some small and inconsiderable Circumstances. There are several Historians and Chroniclers, which give an Account of the Life and Reign of many of our Kings of England ; and although they differ in many Circumstances of things, yet this was never made an Argument to doubt of the Truth of the

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the main History, wherein they all agree. And why may not the Scripture-Historians be as favourably censured as all other Historians in the World are? *Thirdly*, There are many things which are above my Reason and Understanding, which I cannot comprehend in my Mind, nor frame a clear and distinct Notion of; which yet I cannot say, are contrary to my Reason: Because (though they are above my reach, yet) I do not find that they do contradict any of those plain and self-evident Principles which are implanted in my Understanding. For Example, I am not able distinctly to apprehend how the smallest Particle of Matter, which can be assigned,

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signed, is yet in it self capable of being for ever divided ; so that no part of Matter, though ever so small, can ever be so much as conceived to be absolutely indivisible. And yet this is so far from being contrary to my Reason, that my Reason it self does fully satisfy me that the thing is so, though I am not able to comprehend the manner of it. The same thing also may be said concerning the necessity of some thing being without any Beginning. (of which, see S. 5, 6.) Now, if I meet with any thing in Scripture which is thus above my Reason, but not contrary to it, I cannot refuse my Assent unto it. I mean always, upon a Supposition that the Words do appear

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pear evidently to carry such a Sense.) For I cannot conclude such a thing to be impossible: Because I do not find it contrary to my Reason, though above it. And if it be a thing in my Apprehension possible, I must believe it to be true, when I find that God has declared it so to be. Other things, again, there are, which are directly contrary unto those self-evident Notions and Principles, which my Reason finds to be connatural with it self. For Example; That *a Part is equal to the Whole*; and such like Absurdities. Now, *if any such Propositions as these, which are contrary to my Reason, should occur to me in Scripture, I cannot possibly believe them to be*

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be true in a Literal Sense ; (for that were to renounce the clear Dictates of my Reason and Understanding, upon which the Certainty of all things which I believe or know, is ultimately built ; and without which, I could have no Certainty of the Being of God, or the Truth of any Religion ;) and therefore I must needs understand them to be meant figuratively. And that Figure which best agrees to such Words, according to the most common Custom of Speech, and is most conformable to common Sense and Reason, I think, is always to be preferred. I never read any Book, to my knowledge, but in it I found many Expressions which, taken literally

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and strictly, were absurd and ridiculous ; but, taken figuratively, as 'tis evident they were intended, did contain very good Sense and Meaning. Since then the Holy Scriptures were written in such Words and Expressions as were commonly used among Men in Speaking and Writing, why should we think that strange in them, which is so usual in all other Books ?

XXXIV. *Thirdly*, It may be objected, That this Doctrine which I have taught, leaves every Man entirely to his own Reason and Understanding, to find out the true Religion, and the Way to Heaven. Now, since there is so great a difference between the Notions and
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Sentiments of different Men, it must needs follow, that, all Men being left wholly to themselves, there must necessarily be great Variety, and even Contrariety, of Opinions among them concerning Religion. And if God requires no more from every Man, but to do his best Endeavour, and to chuse that way which he thinks to be the truest; from hence it will follow, That two Men who are contrary one to another in the Point of Religion, may yet both be in the right Way to Heaven; and a *Turk*, or a Heathen, may be saved, as well as a Christian, if they are but strongly persuaded that they are in the right. I answer; *First*, That if the

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Objection means, that I leave every Man to his own Reason and Understanding, without any other help, to find out the Truth of Religion, it is a mistake. For I have asserted, That every Man, according to the Measure of his Learning, ought to make use of all the Means and Helps he can, to understand the Scriptures, and the Will of God. (See §. 14. and §. 25.) But if the Meaning be, That *I leave every Man to chuse that Religion which, after a serious Enquiry, appears to him to be the best*; (which is all that I contend for;) In this I say no more than what all Men must, and do, say, as well as I. For, either a Man must never enquire into the
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Truth of his Religion at all, (and then he chuses his Religion by mere chance; and since there are many false Religions, and but one true, 'tis great odds but he lights upon a wrong one;) Or, if he does enquire, either he must chuse that which he thinks not to be the best, (and then he acts against his Conscience,) or that which he thinks is the best; Which is what I assert, and what every Man of Sense professes himself to do. *Secondly*, As there are many Differences in the Notions and Sentiments of Men, concerning those things which are, in some measure, abstruse and obscure; so, on the other side, there are many things so apparent,

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rent, and evident, that Men
who are sincere and unbyassed,
if they have but common
Sense, can never differ about
them: Amongst which, I
think, I may reckon all those
things which God requires of
necessity to any Man's Salva-
tion (§. 3.) And whereas the
World has, for these many
Years, found, that compelling
Men to this or that Religion,
contrary to their own Senti-
ments, has been so far from be-
getting Unity of any sort, that,
on the contrary, it has even di-
stracted Mankind, not only
with Variety of Opinions,
(each Party taking a delight to
thwart other,) but also with
War and Confusion; If every
Man were left to himself, to
follow

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follow what Religion he pleases, (as he shall answer to God for his Sincerity,) it is very probable that most Men, having no Worldly Interest to serve by this or that Religion, would, in time, be brought to agree in all the great and necessary Truths of Religion; which are plain and evident to every sober and inquisitive Person. And as for things not absolutely necessary, and of an inferiour sort, (as I have said, §. 26.) if Men would be but peaceable, their Mistakes, and consequently their Differences about them, could do no great harm. But if Men will still differ even about the essential and necessary Parts of Religion, I know no Remedy for

it upon Earth; but must refer the Matter wholly to the Judgment of God in Heaven.

Thirdly, I do not maintain, That he who is in an Errour, that is, a *Turk*, or an Heathen, (whatever the strength and sincerity of his Persuasion may be,) is in as sure a Way to Heaven and Salvation, as he who is an Orthodox-Man, and a Christian. How God will deal with those that are mistaken, and cannot help it, I do not determine. All that I would insinuate (§. 14.) is, That he will not punish any Man for any Errour, or Mistake, which he falls into, through a pure Defect of his Understanding, and not through any Fault or Neglect of
of

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of his Will. But how far he will reward such a Person for his good Meaning, is more than I can tell.

XXXV. *Fourthly*, It may be objected, That this Doctrine does, in effect, undermine and enervate the Force and Power of all Civil Government, by opening a Way for all Malefactors to escape Punishment, how great soever their Crimes may be. If such a Person should plead thus for himself, That he was fully persuaded in his Mind and Conscience, that it was the Will of God, that he should commit such a Theft, or Murther, of which he is accused; and that therefore, according to this Doctrine, it was his Duty, in the

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sight of God, to act according to this Persuasion ; The Magistrate, who knows not the Hearts of Men, can never be able certainly to discover, but that this is a real Truth, that he was so persuaded. And if every Man, in all the Duties of Religion, is bound to act according to his own Sense and Persuasion of Things ; with what Conscience can a Magistrate punish such a Person for that Fact, which, for ought he knows , it was his Duty to commit ? I will not say, but that it may so fall out, that a Man may think it to be his Duty to commit the most horrid Villainies, since Jesus Christ himself assures his Disciples, That the Time would come, that

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that whoſo killed them, would think he did God Service, *Joh.* 16. 2. And how far God Almighty will be merciful unto ſuch Perſons who commit ſuch Facts out of pure Ignorance, and not out of Malice, I had rather *St. Paul* ſhould determine than I. (See *1 Tim.* 1. 13.) But to the Objection, I think it ſufficient to answer, That the Civil Magiſtrate, as well as other Men, is bound to act according to the cleareſt Conviction, and ſtrongest Perſuaſion of his own Mind. If therefore, upon the Examination of all Circumſtances, he be well ſatiſfied, and really believes, that ſuch a Plea from a Malefactor is no real Truth; but only a mere Trick, and Pretence,

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tence, in hopes to escape Punishment; he ought to take no notice of it, but to pronounce his Sentence according to the Law. But that which comes up close to the Objection, and which, I think, is the fullest and truest Answer, is this; viz. That *the Civil Magistrate has nothing to do to enquire or regard how the Matter stands between God and the Conscience of the Transgressor of the Law of the Land, so as to be thereby any way influenced in the Passing his Judgment.* It is enough to him, if he be well and thoroughly convinced, that the Laws by which he acts, are no way contrary to the known Law of God. There are many Cases wherein
in

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in a Man offends highly against the Law of God, in which the Civil Magistrate has no Power to inflict any Punishment on the Offender; because the Fault which he may have committed, does not, it may be, any way tend to the damage or disturbance of the Civil Society; Which, and which only, is committed to the Care of the Magistrate. Such, for Example, are many Acts of Covetousness, or of Prodigality, and other Sins; against which it is not possible to provide by any Humane Laws. And, on the other side, There are some Cases, wherein a Man may stand absolved before the Tribunal of God, and yet be very justly condemned.

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ned by the Magistrate. Thus,
for instance, If a Man has
committed Theft or Murther,
and, upon a sincere and hearty
Repentance, has obtained the
Pardon of his Sins from God ;
yet, nevertheless, if such a Per-
son be accused, and legally
convicted, of such Crimes be-
fore the Civil Magistrate ; He
not only may, but ought to put
the Law of the Land in Exe-
cution against him, though he
believes him to be ever so pe-
nitent ; That it may be a Ter-
rour unto others. For, if this
ought not to be done, every
Malefactor, by a pretence of
Repentance, (which cannot
certainly be discovered by any
but God,) might escape the
Lash of the Law : By which
Means

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Means all wicked Men would be encouraged to commit all sorts of Crimes. Thus also when the Children of *Israel* were commanded by God to conquer the Land of *Canaan*, we read how they sent Spies to make a Discovery of the Land, that they might the more easily invade it. Now it is most certain, that these Spies did nothing but what they had God Almighty's Warrant for; and yet, if they had been taken by any of the *Canaanitish* Magistrates, and legally convicted of their Design; Who doubts but that it had been lawful for them to have punished them, according to the Law of War, and the Law of Nations? For it is none
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of the Magistrates Business,
to enquire who keeps or trans-
gresses the Laws of God;
(for the Law of God extends
to many Cases, where the
Magistrate's Authority has
nothing to do;) but they
who transgress the Laws of
the Land, and thereby disturb
the Peace of the Common-
wealth, are, upon a due Con-
viction, to be punished by
the Magistrate, (without any
farther Enquiry;) it being
his Business to do every thing
which appears to be necessa-
ry for the Preservation of the
Weal-Publick, provided that
he does nothing which is con-
trary to the known Laws of
God, who is the supreme King
and Lord of all.

XXXVI.

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XXXVI. But *Fifthly*, it will be objected, That whatever becomes of the civil Magistrate's Power, yet this Doctrine, which here is taught, must certainly defeat and cancel all that Authority with which the Church is endowed and invested. For, though the civil Magistrate has no more to look after but onely the Peace and Preservation of the Common-Wealth; yet surely it is the Duty of the Church to take Cognizance of those things which are committed merely against the Law of God. But how can the Church call any Man to an Account for any Sin or Transgression, when a Man may plead for himself, That he
thought

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thought it was his Duty; which Plea, if really true (and who but God can disprove it?) is sufficient, according to this Doctrine, to justify him before God; and consequently to indemnify him from all Censures of the Church. To this I answer, That the Authority of the Church (*i. e.* of a Christian Society) is twofold: *viz.* Either that Authority wherewith it is invested immediately by God, or that which is conferred on it by the civil Laws and Constitutions of the Kingdom or Commonwealth. The latter of these is a civil Authority, though exercised by Ecclesiastical Persons, because it is derived altogether from the civil

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civil Power; And therefore, the Consideration of it must be referred to what is but now said touching the civil Magistrate. But as for that Authority which is given to the Church immediately by God; it is evidently no more than this, *viz.* An Authority to preach the Gospel, and to persuade Men every where to receive it; and an Authority to exclude those Men out of the Society (that is, out of the visible Communion of it) who do not profess the true Christian Faith, and live according to the Christian Law. Other Authority than this does not appear to be given to the Church by God. And nothing that I have said, does in
the

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the least tend to abridge them any way as to the Exercise of this Power. *The Church may and ought to preach the Gospel, and perswade Men to embrace it. And however any Man may be excused before God by invincible Ignorance, yet he is not to be suffered in the visible Communion of the Church, if he does not believe and live as a Christian.*

XXXVII. *Sixthly,* it may be objected that I have several times in this Discourse made use of a Distinction, which Distinction is nevertheless render'd altogether useless and impertinent by the main Design of the Discourse it self. The Distinction is between *necessary* Matters of Religion
and

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and such as are *not necessary*.
(which is referred to, §. 26.
and elsewhere) But if no Man
can be obliged in any Matter
of Religion, any farther than
to do his best Endeavour,
from thence it must follow,
That all things are alike neces-
sary in Religion. For whatso-
ever is within a Man's Power,
according to this Doctrine, is
necessary for him ; and what-
soever is not within his Power
is not necessary ; so that the
very same thing may be ne-
cessary in Respect of one Man,
and not necessary in Respect
of another ; which confounds
the Distinction and renders
it useless. To this I answer,
That *by things necessary I mean*
all such as it is a Sin for a Man

to

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to be ignorant of, if the Knowledge of them be within his Power. Such as are, That Jesus is the Son of God, That God is to be worshipped, &c. By things not necessary, I mean, Such as a Man is not obliged so much as to search after; the Ignorance whereof shall not be accounted sinful before God, although it might have been in a Man's Power to have known them. Such are a great many curious Speculations, which Divines do trouble themselves and the World with; which they themselves do yet confess, are not necessary to any Man's Salvation; and consequently, which a Man is no more obliged to trouble his Head with, than with any
Pro.

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Problems, either in Geometry, or Natural Philosophy.

XXXVIII. *Seventhly*, It may be objected, That this Doctrine must needs encourage Men to continue in their Ignorance, and not to take any Care or Pains to inform themselves concerning the Truth of Religion, or any of the Duties of it. For, Why should a Man take any Pains to get more Knowledge, (which will, it may be, bring Trouble in the Practice of it,) when Ignorance is no manner of Bar to his Salvation? For, let him but live according to the Knowledge which he already has, and God, it seems, requires no more from him. To this I answer, That *for a Man*

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Man to act according to the best of his Knowledge, will not serve his turn; except he has used his best Endeavour, by all Means, to know and understand the Will of God as perfectly as He can. (as I have shewn, all Men are bound to do, §. 14.) Which, though it is a Comfort to those who are ignorant, and cannot help it; yet is no manner of Encouragement or Excuse for those whose Ignorance is their own Fault or Neglect.

XXXIX. My Reason having thus brought me to embrace the Christian Religion, and directed me where and how to seek for the particular Doctrines of it; it follows now, that I should put
this

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this Speculation into Practice ;
that I should search the Scri-
ptures with all the diligence
I can, and set my Mind,
with all its Faculties, on
work, to find out as much
as I am able of the Will of
God, that I may the better
conform my self unto it. This,
with God's help, I design
speedily to do : And the Re-
sult of my Thoughts shall
be published to the World,
if what I here write prove
acceptable. But, in the mean
time, *I think it not improper
here to add some general Con-
siderations, which may serve as
Rules and Guides to me, or
to any other Person, who
shall set himself upon such
an Enquiry ; to direct our*

F

Judg-

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Judgments aright, to the true Doctrine of Christianity, and to keep us from all Mistakes about it.

XL. *First*, Then, I take it for granted, That the Christian Religion is calculated for Men of Reason and Understanding; that is, That it is fit to satisfy and convince every sober Man, who seriously considers the Arguments on which it relies; and is not led astray by Passion, by Prejudice, or Worldly Interest. That this is so, appears very evidently from hence; Because both Jesus and his Apostles do appeal to the common Reason and Understandings of Men, to judge of what they taught.

Yea,

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Yea, and why, even of your selves, judge ye not what is right? says Jesus, *Luk. 12. 57.* Prove all things, hold fast that which is good, says St. Paul, *1 Thes. 5. 21.* Be ready always to give an Answer to every one that asketh you a Reason of the Hope that is in you, says St. Peter, *1 Pet. 3. 15.* Believe not every Spirit; but try the Spirits, whether they are of God, says St. John, *1 Joh. 4. 1.* Hence then I conclude, That there can be nothing in Christian Religion, which contradicts the clear and evident Principles of Natural Reason. For otherwise, a Rational Man could not be a Christian. (See §. 33.)

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XLI. *Secondly*, It appears plain to me, that Christian Religion was calculated, not only, nor chiefly, for Men of great and deep Learning; But also for those of ordinary, plain, and mean Capacities: That is to say, That there is nothing necessary in Christianity, but what may be as well understood by every ordinary, illiterate Man, as by the greatest Scholars. If this were not so, it would not be possible for an unlearned Man to be as good a Christian as one that is learned: Whereas the contrary is most apparently declared in the *New Testament*. *I thank thee, O Father, because thou hast hid these things from*

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from the Wise and Prudent,
and haſt revealed them unto
Babes, ſays Jeſus, *Matth.* 11.
25. To which, the Words
of St. *Paul* do exactly agree,
1 *Cor.* 1. 19. to *Vers.* 7. of
the Second Chapter. And
the ſame St. *Paul* gives us a
Caution, That *Philosophy*
ſhould not corrupt our Chri-
ſtianity, *Col.* 2. 8. And warns
Timothy againſt *Science*, *false-*
ly ſo called, 2 *Tim.* 6. 20.
But there is nothing ſo much
as intimated throughout the
whole *Bible*, that *Philoso-*
phy, or any other Humane
Learning, will qualifie a Man
ever the better, to become a
Christian. I confeſs, indeed,
That, as things ſtand at this
time in the World, it is
F 3 high-

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highly convenient that the Teachers and Preachers of Christianity should be competently skilled in Humane Learning; that they may be the better able to defend their Religion, and the Purity of it, against those who use so much Art and Skill, either to corrupt, or oppose it. But where a Man sets up, not for a Teacher, but only for a true Believer, it is evident, from what has been said, that he has no need of Scholarship; but only of a plain and sober Understanding, to make him capable of all necessary Instruction for a good Christian. Or else, Why should the Gospel be preached so particularly
to

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to the *Poor*, *Matth.* 11. 5.
who are commonly illiterate?
And how should the *Poor* of
this World become so *rich in*
Faith, as *St. James* tells us?
Jam. 2. 5. From whence I
think I may conclude, That
all such *Doctrines*, the *Under-*
standing and *Proof* whereof de-
pend either on the *subtile* *Spe-*
culations of *Humane* *Philoso-*
phy, or the *Niceties* and *Cri-*
ticisms of *Grammatical* *Lear-*
ning, or the *curious* *Know-*
ledge of *History* and *Antiqui-*
ty, are not to be esteemed as
necessary *Parts* of *Christiani-*
ty.

XLII. *Thirdly*, It is no
less evident to me, that the
main *Design* of *Jesus*, and of
his *Disciples*, whom he sent

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to preach the Gospel, was, to make Men, not wiser as to Matters of Speculation; but better, and more virtuous, as to their Lives and Actions. *Knowledge puffeth up; but Charity edifieth*, saith St. Paul, 1 Cor. 8. 1. Thus also, Chap. 13. of the same Epistle, he gives us to understand, that the Gift of *Tongues* and of *Prophecy*, the Understanding of all *Mysteries*, and all *Knowledge*, and *Faith*, are of no value before God, without *Charity*. And that by *Charity*, he means a Life led in the Practice of Virtue and Piety, sufficiently appears by the Sequel of that Chapter. The same St. Paul tells us, *Tit. 2. 13.* That *the Grace*

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Grace of God that bringeth
Salvation, hath appeared unto
all Men; (For what End?
To make them more wise,
more learned, or more lofty
in their Speculations? No
such thing; But,) teaching
us, That, denying Ungodliness,
and Worldly Lusts, we should
live soberly, righteously, and
Godly in this present World.
And, to omit a multitude of
Texts, which might be al-
ledged in so plain a Mat-
ter; I shall only add what
we are told, Rom. 2. 6, &c.
That God will render unto e-
very Man according to his
Deeds, &c. Which is a plain
Demonstration, that it is our
Deeds, that is, our Practices,
our Lives and Conversations,

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that we are chiefly obliged to take care of. I grant, indeed, that God may, if he pleases, command things that are purely Ceremonial, and such as have no manner of Influence upon Vertue and Morality; As undoubtedly he did unto the Children of *Israel*: And if he does command any such things, 'tis certain that we owe Obedience to them by virtue of that Authority which God has over us. He may also reveal such Truths as are merely speculative, and have nothing practical in them: And whosoever is convinced of any such Revelation, is undoubtedly bound to give his Assent to the things so revealed,

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led, although they are beyond the Reach of his Understanding; (as I have said, §. 33.) But from what I have here said, I think I may conclude, That *since Vertue and Morality are undoubtedly the chief Design of Christianity, they ought to be chiefly regarded, and attended to by all Christians. Nor ought any thing which is purely Ceremonial, or Speculative, to be reckoned as a necessary Part of Christian Religion; except it appears very evidently, that God has revealed, or commanded it. Very evidently, I say: For, when a thing is conceived in dark and doubtful Expressions; it is very liable to be mistaken; and he that*
is

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is guilty of such a Mistake,
can very hardly be charged
with a Fault.

XLIII. *Fourthly*, That the Knowledge of God Almighty, his Attributes, and his Law, may, in part, be gathered from the Light of Nature (antecedent to any Revelation) is evident from Reason, and acknowledged by St. Paul. *For the invisible things of him from the Creation of the World are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; even his Eternal Power and Godhead. Rom. i. 20. (See Psal. 19. 1.) And when the Gentiles, which have not the Law, do by Nature the things contained in the Law, these*
having

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having not the Law, are a Law unto themselves; which shew the Work of the Law written in their Hearts, their Conscience also bearing Witness, and their Thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another, Rom. 2. 14, 15.

Now although all things relating to Religion, which may be known by the Light of Nature, are, I think, again repeated and farther explained by the Holy Scripture; Yet because it may be that this will not appear so plainly to every one, I think it necessary here to Note, That we are obliged to give our Assent to those Truths, and our Obedience to those Laws

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Laws of Religion which we are able to discover by our Natural Reason, although the same should not appear to us to be again repeated in Scripture. For, for this very reason St. Paul pronounces the ancient Gentiles to be without Excuse, because that when they knew God, that is, had some Knowledge of him by their natural Understanding, they glorified him not as God, by owning and obeying him. Rom. I. 20, 21, &c. And what is it else but an Appeal to the natural Notions of Mankind, when he exhorts us, That whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things

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things are pure, whatsoever things are Lovely, whatsoever things are of good Report, if there be any Vertue, and if there be any Praise, we should think on these things, Phil. 4. 8.

XLIV. *Fifthly*, He that writes a Treatise upon any Subject, whatsoever he has a Mind that his Reader should particularly observe and be convinced of, he will be sure to lay it down plainly as a main Conclusion; nor will he fail (if he be discreet) as often as Occasion requires, to repeat and referr to it, that the more Notice may be taken of his Meaning and Design. Such things as are mentioned onely occasionally and collaterally,

terally, and not as any part of the main Subject of the Discourse, are not always expressed with so much Care and Exactness, but that often even the meaning of them may be misunderstood. Nor can we be always certain what is the true Sense and Opinion of a Writer, from such accidental Expressions; (which sometimes may be used figuratively, sometimes by way of Allusion or Accommodation, sometimes with Reference to the Capacity of People, without any Regard to the literal Truth of them) except he gives us some farther Explication of his Mind. From
whence

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whence I think I may conclude, That *the necessary Doctrines and Precepts of Christian Religion*, are not to be gathered from those collateral and occasional Expressions which are scattered up and down in the Scriptures; but from the main Scope and Design of the whole Bible in general, and of each Book of it in particular.

XLV. I have thus briefly and plainly given, I hope, a rational Account of Religion; and of Christianity in general. If I find that what I have here writ is likely to do any good in the World, I shall proceed, with God's Assistance, to draw out and publish

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publish a particular Account
of the Doctrines to be be-
lieved, and Duties to be pra-
ctised, by a Christian.

F I N I S.

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